

# **Communicating and Interacting with College Students through a Website Chatbox**

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# Communicating and Interacting with College Students Through a Website Chatbox

## ABSTRACT

Each faculty member at King Saud University has a website where he/she posts course descriptions, tests, publications, resources and others. Some instructors have added a Chatbox (Cbox) widget to their website (or blog) to be able to instantly communicate with their students. A Cbox is an advanced web messaging/commenting/tagging widget and a unique chat and messaging application that brings the best features of traditional chat and tagging systems to the social web. The present study aims to find out the percentage of language instructors who have added a Cbox to their websites, types of issues and concerns that students communicate to their instructors and students and instructors' views on the advantages and disadvantages of using a Cbox as a communication tool. Data were collected using interviews and a content analysis of the students and instructors' posts. It was found that only 14% of the instructors at the College of Languages and Translation use a Cbox. Between 3 and 600 messages were posted. Participants reported that a Cbox is a quick and easy way of communication. Students post questions about the course content, difficulties, administrative issues, rules and regulations, registration and drop-add issues, grades, exams, personal and social issues and college events. Instructors provide advice, reassurance, clarify difficulties and respond to queries in a maximum of 4 hours. They post messages and responses at their own convenience. However, Cboxes have no terms and conditions of use, cannot be monitored, are open to the public, i.e., anybody can post a message, are not user-friendly, and whatever is posted is disclosed to the public.

**Keywords:** *Cboxes, Chat Box, communication, student-teacher communication, student-teacher interaction*

## INTRODUCTION

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is a contemporary technological tool used for interaction and communication among professionals, students and instructors and other people via computers or mobile devices to exchange text, images, audio, and video. There are numerous forms of CMC such as email, network communication, text messaging, text-based, audio-based, and video-based chat rooms, chat widgets especially those on library websites, chat tools in Learning Management Systems (LMS), online discussion forums, blogs, newsgroups, bulletin boards, mailing lists, videoconferencing and social media.

CMC can be synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous CMC takes place when two actively communicating parties are communicating at the same time as in videoconferencing and instant messaging. Asynchronous CMC takes place when a conversation does not depend on an immediate answer from communicating parties as in email, video, and text messages.

CMC has many benefits. It bridges all physical and social barriers in the society enabling people from different places to communicate effectively within a short period of time. It saves time, money, and resources by facilitating the use of all communication formats. It allows work that used to require everyone in an office to be present, to be done across distances. It enables people to respond fast.

A review of the literature showed some studies that compared different modes of CMC. For example, Goldsborough (2004) compared email and instant messaging. He indicated that unlike e-mail, in which a manager sends messages to recipients who read them whenever they check their email in-box, instant messaging allows a manager and his/her recipients to be online at the same time. Messaging is rapidly interactive and takes place back and forth. It is used for collaboration and lets users send spreadsheets or other documents as attachments and do voice and video conferencing. In another study, Fukkink & Hermanns (2009) compared telephone communication and the confidential one-on-one online chat communication by a Dutch Kindertelefoon. The children experienced a higher sense of well-being and a reduced severity of their emotional problems after consulting the Kindertelefoon. The findings were more in favor of the chat than telephone communication. In a third study, Sarré (2011) compared the discussion board, text chat and videoconferencing to foster negotiated interactions (negotiation of meaning routines and negative feedback) and explore the influence of task type on such interactions in English for specific purposes by M.A. French-speaking students. Results demonstrated that closed tasks fostered more negotiation work than open tasks, and that all three CMC modes gave rise to negotiation of meaning. However, significant differences were found between the three CMC modes. Overall, videoconferencing was conducive to a lot more negotiation of meaning than the discussion board and text chat. The discussion board interactions did not generate any corrective feedback.

Few more studies focused on chat facilities as a pedagogic tool, especially in language learning. Mubarak, Rohde & Pakulski (2009) indicated that the Internet chat room is a cheap and student-friendly tool which universities can use to meet the social and psychological needs of their students.

Novice-level EFL secondary school students learning engaged in 40-45-minute-long text and voice chat sessions in dyads, guided by 8 tasks over a 4-week period. Findings showed an increase in the speaking proficiency level of the experimental group students and a decrease in the anxiety levels for the text chat group only (Satar & Ozdener, 2008). Similarly, Blake (2009) compared the oral fluency development of 34 ESL students who participated in a 6-week course in a text-based Internet chat environment, a traditional face-to-face environment, and a control environment that involved no student interaction. Gain scores of participants in the text-based Internet chat environment were significantly higher on the phonation time ratio and mean length of run measures than the gain scores of participants in the face-to-face and control environments.

In the United Arab Emirates, Hamano-Bunce (2011) found benefits in using chatrooms as a medium for language tasks. Chatroom interaction was less effective for language learning than face-to-face oral interaction, suggesting that slow typing can hinder language production, negotiation, collaboration, and noticing. The researcher concluded that, unless there is a specific reason for using a chat room in the classroom, chat room interaction might be better left for use outside the classroom, so that students can fully benefit from face-to-face oral interaction inside the classroom.

As for the chat tool in Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Blackboard, Kirkpatrick (2005) revealed that it may enhance conventional, class-based techniques for generating informal discussions between the students and coordinate activities between

classes. However, the instructor indicated that the integration of the chat tool into the delivery of the unit was highly problematic.

In Jenks' (2009) study, multi-participant text-based chat rooms were beneficial for language teaching and learning. But in multi-participant voice-based chat rooms, there was overlapping talk where multiple voices were heard in the absence of nonverbal cues. In overlapping talk, pauses act as a source and as an interactional resource.

Since it is the era of web-based social interaction, social chat is an important component of learning because it leads to the development of related skills and knowledge in primary school children in Australia and was an important precursor to more formal learning opportunities (Maher, 2009).

In Saudi Arabia, each faculty member at King Saud University (KSU), in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, has a website where he/she posts course descriptions, course material, assignments, tests, publications, resources and others. Some instructors have added a Chatbox (Cbox) to their website (or blog) to be able to instantly communicate with their students. However, there is a lack of prior studies that investigated the effect of using chat widgets in language learning. Therefore, the purpose of the current research study is to find out the following: (i) The percentage of female instructors at the College of Languages and Translation (COLT), KSU, who have added a Cbox to their websites. (ii) The types of issues and concerns that students communicate to their instructors; (iii) Students and instructors' views of the advantages and disadvantages of using a Cbox as a communication tool.

## **WHAT IS A CBOX AND HOW TO GET IT**

A Cbox is an advanced web messaging/commenting/tagging widget and a unique chat and messaging application that brings the best features of traditional chat and tagging systems to the social web. It adds a new dimension of interaction to a teacher's website or blog. The Cbox has a permanent message history so that visitors are placed immediately in context. It is finely customizable, fun and easy to use. It is secure and gives the user control over who can post and can block spam. It is highly scalable and supports hundreds of users on a single chat. It functions on every browser as it requires no plugins.

There are few Cbox websites where an instructor can create her own Cbox such as:

- <http://www.cbox.ws/>
- [http://xat.com/web\\_gear/](http://xat.com/web_gear/)
- <http://www.spinchat.com/chatbox/index>
- <http://www.chat.org.uk/webmasters/>

The instructor can sign up for a Cbox by filling in the required details in the blank boxes in Image (1) in the Appendix and by copying and pasting the html code.

To post messages, the instructor can do the following:

- click on the "name" box and enter a screen name.
- click on "message" and type his/her message.
- hit enter to post!
- add smileys and avatar images.
- change the text color.
- change the font style (bold, italics, underlined).

- use line breaks.
- post links with an <http://address>

Samples of instructor-student Cbox chats are shown in Image (2), (3), and (4) in the Appendix.

## **INSTRUCTOR POPULATION**

The population of this study consisted of all female instructors in the English and French Departments at COLT. They hold a Ph.D., M.A. and B.A. degrees and are specialized in language teaching, linguistics and/or translation. All 80 female faculty members at COLT were contacted via SMS and email to find out whether they have a Cbox or not. It was found that 11 instructors have a Cbox widget in their websites.

## **CBOX SAMPLES**

The following faculty Cboxes were randomly selected for content analysis:

- Dina's Cbox:  
<http://faculty.ksu.edu.sa/dinaalsibai/default.aspx>
- Ghyzayel's Cbox:  
<http://faculty.ksu.edu.sa/ghyzayel/default.aspx>
- Seham's Cbox:  
<http://faculty.ksu.edu.sa/skareh/default.aspx>
- Reima's Cbox  
<http://faculty.ksu.edu.sa/aljarf>

## **STUDENT SAMPLE**

For purposes of the present study, a sample of 63 female students was selected from courses taught by instructors who use a Cbox in order to explore their experience with Cbox communication, and their views on the advantage and disadvantages of communicating with their instructors through a Cbox.

## **DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

The author interviewed the 11 instructors who use a Cbox and surveyed the 93 students. She used open ended questions to trigger responses and comments. In addition, she analyzed the content of the students and instructors' posts in the sample of 4 Cboxes selected and mentioned above. Results are reported qualitatively, in addition to frequency counts of instructors having a Cbox and frequency counts of posts in each of the 11 Cboxes for the 11 instructors.

## **RESULTS**

Findings of the present study have shown that only 14% of the instructors at COLT use a Cbox. Table 1 shows the names of instructors who use a Cbox with the total number of

messages posted in each. Table 1 shows that the instructors' total Cbox messages ranged between 3 and 600 messages with a median of 130 messages.

Table 1: Total number of Messages Per Instructor

Instructors	Total Chat Messages
Dina	600
Johara	187
Sara O	175
Inaam	140
Ghyzayel	139
Seham	130
Reima	110
Asma	99
Sara Sh	83
Ameera	33
Fatma	3

## CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE CBOX POSTS

Analysis of the instructors' Cboxes showed that the Cbox window is divided into 3 parts: A left and a right panel where the instructors posts material, resources and information related to the course such as: The course name, course description, weekly syllabus, worksheets and exercises for each topic taught, useful information about each lesson, favorite **websites** related to the course such as Test Your English, ESL Links For Students, Resources For College Instructors, Videos About Teacher Development, Comparative Culture Guidelines and Syllabus, Exam Dates, students' grades, course project, weekly video clips, exam format, Quotes, a famous author' bio, word of the day with its definition and synonyms. In the middle part, which is the main part of the Cbox, the instructor and the students post their messages, queries, responses and interactions.

## INSTRUCTORS' VIEWS

The instructors surveyed indicated that the Cbox has numerous benefits. It is free. It is multilingual, i.e., the instructor and the students can use any language for the Cbox interface and in chatting with others. In image 2 (left), the instructor and her students have used Arabic, English and French as the instructor teaches English and French languages. The instructors added that a Cbox is a quick and easy way of communication. They do not need to sign in using a username and a password. The Cbox owner receives information about visitors, hits, and records. The students post questions about their course content, difficulties, administrative issues, queries about rules and regulations, registration and drop-add issues, grades, exams, and personal, social and college events. They post latest news. They post links to websites. It is a quick way to post announcements. Instructors use it to clarify the difficulties that students have in the courses they teach. They provide advice, reassurance, empathy, and moral support to the students. They can post messages and responses at their own convenience. They respond to queries in a maximum of 4 hours. Some instructors wrote:

**Instructor:** *The Cbox saves me time and effort. Instead of responding individually to students' email, I respond to students' questions only once and all the students who have the same query can see and read my response.*

On the other hand, the instructors reported numerous disadvantages of the Cbox. For example, Cbox messages have a limited length. Cboxes have no terms and conditions of use. It is open to the public. Anybody can post a message. Whatever is posted by the instructor or students is disclosed to the public. Teaching techniques and relationship with students are exposed to the world. Posts cannot be moderated, and messages cannot be deleted. Some students might use abusive language and may attack instructor. Some of the queries posted by the students target controversial issues among students. Some post anonymously using a nickname or their first name only. The college administration can see how instructors interact with their students, what they do and what they teach. The college administration may misunderstand certain comments and responses. Some instructors said:

**Instructor:** *Students in other sections post questions in my Cbox because their instructors do not communicate with them.*

**Instructor:** *Grad students from other colleges post (not our college) queries and ask for advice.*

## STUDENTS' VIEWS

In response to the survey, the students revealed that the Cbox is faster in communicating with their instructors than e-mail. It is user-friendly and easy to use. There is no need to sign in. The user only needs to enter a username and a message. The student does not need a Cbox account to post questions and comments. When the students post a query, they guarantee the instructor's response. They receive prompt responses. The instructor responds all the time and to all queries. When they use e-mail, the instructor may not respond, she may not get their message, or their messages might go to the spam folder. Unlike e-mail in which questions and responses are personal and private, the Cbox gives all the students a chance to benefit from each other's questions and comments. Interacting with their instructors and classmates helps them practice and improve their English. They are more careful with spelling and grammar than e-mail because everybody reads their messages. They benefit from the resources, links, videos, extra worksheets, word of the day, author's bio and quotes posted by the instructors. The students added that the Cbox keeps them up to date with latest events at their college, university, and world events. It helps them break the ice, develop rapport with their instructors and classmates.

**Sara said:** *The Cbox makes me feel the instructor is a friend. Our relationship is informal.*

**Nada added:** *The Cbox creates a warm climate where we feel at home. We can express our thoughts directly and openly.*

**Suna commented:** *Whenever I have something difficult that I do not understand, I post a message about it in the Cbox and my friends and instructor respond to me in a short time. I do not have to wait for the next day to see the instructor is her office hours during which I might have class.*

## DISCUSSION

Findings of the current study are consistent with findings of prior studies on the pedagogical, language learning and social benefits of using chat, chatrooms, and instant messaging such as

Hamano-Bunce (2011); Mubarak, Rohde & Pakulski (2009); Blake (2009); Kirkpatrick (2005); Jenks (2009); Maher (2009); (Satar & Ozdener, 2008) and Stein et al (2007).

On the other hand, the types of requests that students make in the current study are partially consistent with the types of requests graduate and undergraduate students made in their emails to the author as reported in Al-Jarf (2009) and Al-Jarf (2005). In these two studies, undergraduate students asked for help with assignments; asked academics question about their courses and how to improve their English; asked the author to recommend a college for graduate study, requested samples of college admission test questions, and needed career advice. Graduate students requested a list of references and websites for their theses; asked questions about first and second language acquisition and how to teach EFL; asked for the authors' publications; asked the author to suggest a thesis topic for them, to validate and edit their questionnaires; requested a list of criteria, reading and speaking skills; and asked the author to read, edit and comment on their proposals and give suggestions for improvement. Some asked her to administer their questionnaires or to select the research sample for them and requested permission to translate some of her articles or replicate a study of hers (Al-Jarf, 2009; Al-Jarf, 2005). In the Cbox, the students asked questions about the course content, difficulties, administrative issues, rules and regulations, registration and drop-add issues, grades, exams, and personal, social and college events. Instructors use the Cbox to clarify the difficulties that students have in the courses they teach.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To encourage instructors to use a Cbox for communicating with students, this study recommends that all instructors be introduced to the Cbox, its uses, advantages, and disadvantages, how to install it and how to use it. Moreover, this study recommends that all students be introduced to the Cbox and its uses, and be encouraged to communicate with instructors through a Cbox.

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## Appendix

Image (1): How to Sign Up for A Cbox

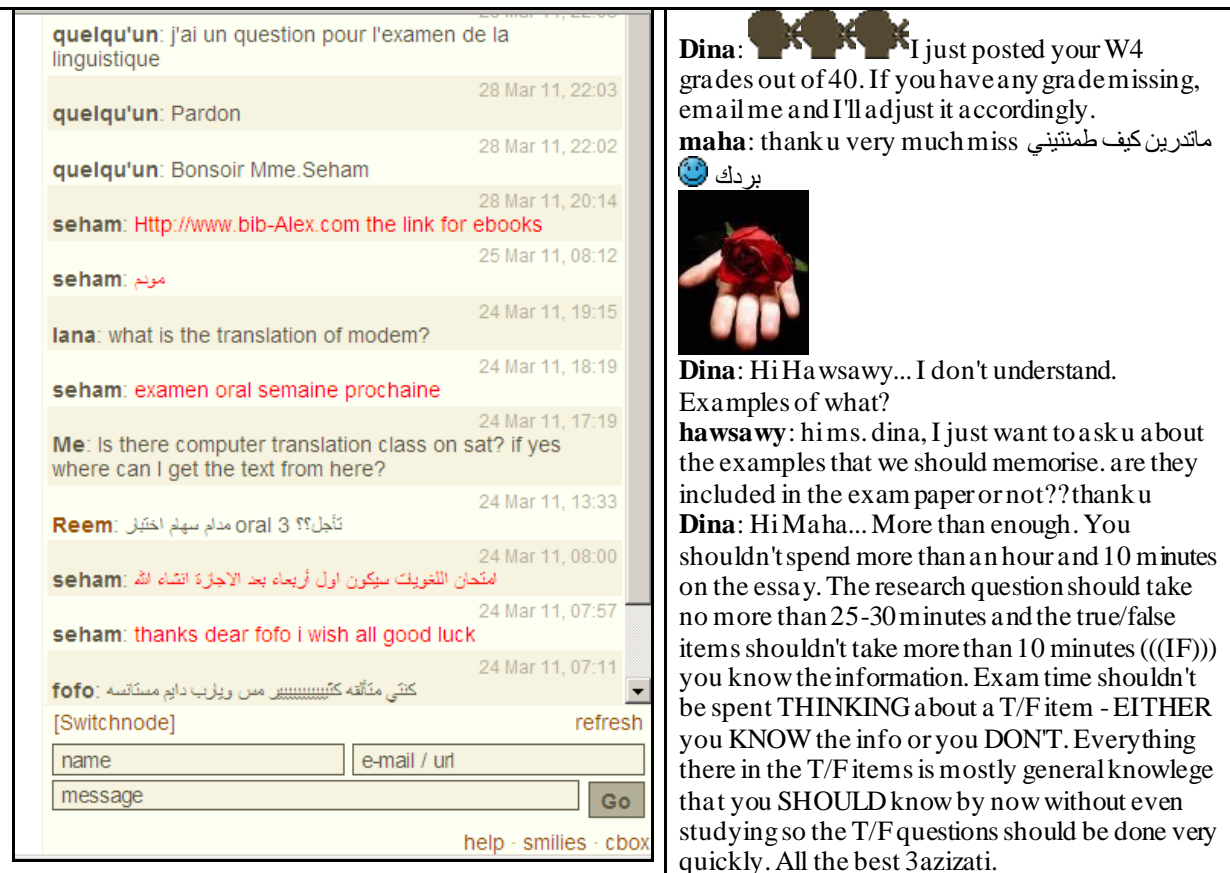


Image (2): Examples of Cbox Message Exchanges Between the Students and 2 Instructor



Image (3): Cbox Messages and Interaction between an Instructor and her students

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Lecture 11</li> <li>» Lecture 12</li> <li>» Lecture 13</li> <li>» Lecture 14</li> <li>» Lecture 15</li> <li>» Lecture 16</li> <li>» Lesson 32 &amp; 33</li> <li>» <b>Marks</b></li> <li>» ..... Group B</li> <li>» <b>Vocabulary 2 (182 NAJD)</b></li> <li>» Course Description</li> <li>» Weekly Syllabus</li> <li>» Worksheet 1 (Roots)</li> <li>» Worksheet 2 (Binary Nouns)</li> <li>» Worksheet 3 (Exercises)</li> </ul>		<div style="text-align: right;">? will be</div> <div style="text-align: right;">أليس 11, 08:22 م 1</div> <div style="text-align: right;">hi teacher iwanna ask you about :<b>soso</b></div> <div style="text-align: right;">? the exam ist after the break</div> <div style="text-align: right;">أليس 11, 12:40 م 1</div> <div style="text-align: right;">I don't really understand u , :<b>Ghyzayel</b></div> <div style="text-align: right;">manager</div> <div style="text-align: right;">من 11, 08:30 م 31</div> <div style="text-align: right;">or I have in loved with :<b>manager</b></div> <div style="text-align: right;">من 11, 08:30 م 31</div> <div style="text-align: right;">ex.I have had in love with :<b>manager</b></div> <div style="text-align: right;">من 11, 08:29 م 31</div> <div style="text-align: right;">phrasal verbs (can it take :<b>manager</b></div> <div style="text-align: right;">?derivatives of verb or not</div> <div style="text-align: right;">من 11, 08:22 م 31</div> <div style="text-align: right;">hello,Ms i wanaa ask sth :<b>manager</b></div> <div style="text-align: right;">?plz</div> <div style="text-align: right;">من 11, 08:14 ص 31</div> <div style="text-align: right;">not appropriate :<b>Ghyzayel</b></div> <div style="text-align: right;">من 11, 01:09 ص 31</div> <div style="text-align: right;">hh: اعرف انو فيه فيريز تانيه ممكن استخدمها بس</div> <div style="text-align: right;">[Get a Cbox]</div> <div style="text-align: right;">تحديث</div> <div style="text-align: right;">الإسم</div> <div style="text-align: right;">البريد/عنوان ويب</div> <div style="text-align: right;">الرسالة</div> <div style="text-align: right;">اذهب</div> <div style="text-align: right;">مساعدة - الإلتصامات - مربع الدردشة</div>
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mage (4): Cbox exchanges between Students and Their Instructors about some grammatical structures under study